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The Arts Monographs

GEORGES SEURAT

THE ARTS
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The Arts Monographs

GEORGES SEURAT

BY
WALTER PACH

ILLUSTRATED

NEW YORK
DUFFIELD AND COMPANY
THE ARTS
1923

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FOREWORD

The object of The Arts Monographs is to present in workable, concise, but fully-illustrated form, a series of small books on various artists and subjects of art which shall not be too expensive for general circulation and which, in text and illustration, shall stimulate the interest of the lay reader while at the same time serving the purposes of the more special student.

FORBES WATSON, *Editor.*

ILLUSTRATIONS

THE CIRCUS (*Collection of Mr. John Quinn*).

VAUDEVILLE DANCERS.

THE PORT.

THREE MODELS (*Collection of Mr. John Quinn*).

BATHERS (1884).

IN THE PARK (1886).

BOAT AT DOCK.

LADY POWDERING (*Collection of Mr. John Quinn*).

LANDSCAPE (*Collection of Mr. John Quinn*).

LE CROTOY (*Collection of Mr. John Quinn*).

LANDSCAPE.

PAUL SIGNAC.

SINGER.

LA PARADE.

GEORGES SEURAT

GEORGES SEURAT

(1859-1891)

Felix qui sciat rerum causas—Virgil

IN the growth of the world's appreciation of great artists, three stages are usually to be distinguished: first, that of mystery, when the master is understood almost as little by the few who love him as by the many who ignore or dislike him; then, the period when the ideas he expressed have permeated the general atmosphere, when a whole generation is working with them; finally, the stage of full acceptance, when he is ranged with the classics and sought by museums—to relinquish the direction of ideas to the representative of another generation, while around him a new mystery accumulates, which will be penetrated from time to time as artists come to need his teaching.

Cézanne furnishes a ready example of the artist who has entered upon the third stage of appreciation; his followers—those who represent the second period—are still with us. And we have not far to seek for the echoes of that first period when the master was admired by a few great men—Pissarro, Renoir, Monet, Redon and some others—but for qualities quite different from those we now see in him, and

from those that the future will find in him. Outside of the small number of individuals who cared for him there was only the measureless contempt and misunderstanding of which the last moanings are dying away today.

For Seurat this first period is equally a thing of the past: born just twenty years later than Cézanne, his ideas are those that the world has been dealing with in recent times, some twenty years after Cézanne's were the expression of the generative force in the minds of men. The period of misunderstanding in the case of Seurat was not marked by so much of hilarity and abuse as that which met the Impressionists and their first successors. The mistake was rather of seeing Seurat merely as a man who continued the work of Impressionism with greater or less ability, instead of recognizing that his theory opens up vistas which were unknown to the great artists of the preceding generation. The typical idea was that expressed by George Moore in "Modern Painting" (published thirty years ago); he speaks of Seurat as a representative of what he calls the universal decadence in French art, going on to specify that it came from the exhaustion of French genius which was, according to him, to remain sterile for a long period of repose. Quite as far from present-day ideas is Clive Bell's statement in his "Art" where we read that Seurat, like Signac and Cross, produced little else than "polychromatic charts of desolating dullness." Such a verdict is scarcely more wrong than the linking of the three names, as if the artists were of similar value.

Coming to Roger Fry, one's old admiration for him is strengthened by the sincere and eloquent *mea culpa* which he offers in "Vision and Design" for his failure to appreciate Seurat at an earlier time. The first among English writers to do so, as far as I can learn, he points to a just estimate of the great artist. In France the appreciation of Seurat began with Signac. Yet in his "D'Eugène Delacroix au Néo-Impressionnisme," dedicated to the memory of his friend, he speaks chiefly if not wholly of Seurat's rôle in the defining of color-principles which the Impressionists had used in a less developed form.

Félix Fénéon was the first critic to realize that with Seurat a man of great importance had appeared, and in 1886 defended him in a brilliant essay. In 1890 Jules Christophe published, in the leaflets "Les Hommes d'Aujourd'hui," a full statement of the artist's career, then less than a year from its untimely end. While M. Christophe's attitude is that of an admirer he cannot restrain a note of doubt as his last word. After reproducing a letter in which Seurat set forth the principles of his art, the writer observes, "It is logical—perhaps too logical."

Such a sentence is clearly the mark of that first period I have described when even those who care most for the work of an artist fail to perceive the real significance of his ideas. It is only today, when the effort of the succeeding generation has clarified our understanding of those principles of Seurat's, that we can see how he pointed the direction that men were to take. Between 1890 and the present

time we may note the increasing comprehension of his value in Meier-Graefe's "History of Modern Art," in which that alert critic pays worthy tribute to Seurat's genius. It is recognized in several passages of Elie Faure's "History of Art." The finest appreciation to appear so far, however, is that which Lucie Cousturier contributed to two numbers of *L'Art Décoratif* in 1912 and 1914, and which has since appeared in book form. Not to pause over the wholly admirable critical passages in Mme. Cousturier's writing, or her penetrating observations on the problems of drawing and color in general, the work will doubtless stand, with the invaluable book by Signac, as the most complete statement as to the life and evolution of the master of the school in which Mme Cousturier has herself done painting of an exceedingly able character.

My reason for following in such detail the evolution of opinion on Seurat is that the increasingly high estimate of him is the clearest indication of the vitality of his art. Bonington, who died at an early age, as did Seurat, had his chief influence during his life and, long afterward, so careful a critic as C. J. Holmes sums him up as "brilliant and shallow." Seurat, in contrast with Bonington, had but a narrow group of admirers during his life and the reasons for admiration that they give in no way anticipate the idea we have of him today.

We have reached it through what must always be the most important commentary on an art—its effect on the workers of a later time. Viewed from the standpoint of today one sees how sharp a

distinction is to be drawn between Seurat and the other Neo-Impressionists, how misleading is the easy habit of bracketing the names of Seurat and Signac—with their alliteration like those of Manet and Monet, or Delacroix and Delaroche.

The ideas which Signac (an “enchanted tapestry-maker,” as Elie Faure calls him) has used so steadily in his work and has given to those whom he has influenced are the ideas of a colorist. The true successors of Seurat are the men who have worked at the problem of form. The effort of the twentieth century has been above all toward a deeper acquaintance with the properties of solids, and it is this research that makes us see, as we could not see at an earlier time, the deepest value of Seurat’s art. Through all his drawings (some four hundred of which have been preserved), through the paintings and through the studies that led up to the paintings, the same purpose appears always more pure and insistent: the extricating of essential, expressive form from the chaos which nature is when seen by our eyes.

This is the heritage that the generation of today has taught us to recognize in the master’s work. Derain, Braque, Picasso, Metzinger (himself a Neo-Impressionist at an early period), and the other men who have profited by Seurat’s analysis of form, who have seen that in our day it offered the most fruitful field for development, are the artists who have given what will probably be the final contribution to our understanding of Seurat’s importance. It is as an echo of the past that we look upon Renoir’s words, as quoted in Vollard’s

recent book—words that indicate no very great enthusiasm for the younger painter, whom he mentions only as the exponent of a color-theory. And even Matisse, not fifteen years older than most of the Cubists, unconsciously expresses the difference between his viewpoint and theirs in his opinion of Seurat. As fervent an admirer of the artist as anyone alive, he yet withholds from him the fullest title to greatness as a painter because of the divided brush-work so necessary to Seurat in the study by which he increased our knowledge.

Having observed that quality in the artist's mind through which he affected the future, we must now consider him in his relation to the past. For Seurat, as the true type of the French artist, is part of a great line, deriving from the earlier classics and so fitting himself to carry on their teaching to those who will be the classics of the future. Indeed the time is not far off when we shall see him quite as much in relation with the early schools as with the modern ones. It is after a reference to the old masters that Roger Fry speaks of Seurat's "supreme merits as a designer," and if the association of ideas is at all an accident, we may be certain, considering Mr. Fry's constant relating of the contemporary classics with those of the past, that he would readily admit that the qualities for which we admire the great draftsmen of Florence, the great composers and colorists of Venice, of France and of Flanders, furnished his reason for admiring Seurat. We shall see that it was the museums which gave to the artist himself his best training.

Georges Seurat was born in Paris in 1859. His family was well to do and though they never showed any great comprehension of the artist's importance, they at least spared him the struggles that so many others have had to face. At the age of sixteen Seurat left school and entered the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, where he studied for four years, his chief teacher being Henri Lehmann, a pupil of Ingres. At this period and for some years afterward, the young painter was without contact with the new ideas of his time, to such an extent indeed, that, as late as 1882 he was unaware of the very existence of the Impressionists. The fact, which we find stated in Signac's book, would be almost impossible to accept did it not come from so early a friend of Seurat's. But if the Ecole was so successful in suppressing all knowledge of the modern masters, it could not, in Seurat's case at least, counteract the teachings of the old masters. Like Cézanne, like nearly every great modern artist, in fact, Seurat haunted the galleries, storing up his impressions of the masters to whom he referred with ease in the conversations of later years, and beginning, with the classic works, that inquiry into the processes of art which he was to continue in his own work.

The records of his life are silent as to the particular works which gave him the clue to his ideas of form. Unlike Manet who incorporated in his own pictures his notes from Velasquez and Goya and unlike van Gogh who did the same with Rembrandt and Daumier, Seurat's work permits us only to surmise which masters exercised

the greatest influence over him. Signac mentions the names of Rubens and Raphael, Michael Angelo and Delacroix. The classical strain in Seurat's art is so strong, however, that one is constantly tempted to see in his various works a homage to one or another of his great predecessors. Thus among the works that Seurat has left us, a drawing of a woman and child is near enough to Gothic renderings of the subject to contain a direct allusion to some sculpture seen by the modern artist, and if the conception of a face in flat profile as in this drawing of Signac is not immediately inspired by the medals of Pisanello, it may, at all events, be placed beside the best of them without suffering by the comparison.

When we come to the basis of Seurat's study of color we are on surer ground. Delacroix was the mentor of the earnest students of the time and Seurat gave him devout attention, following the master's example in the examination of the theories of the scientists as well as the results of the painters. The books of Chevreul, Helmholtz, Humbert de Superville, Charles Henry and of our Ogden N. Rood of Columbia University were consulted by the painter, who through their aid, arrived at theories which required but little adjustment to harmonize with those of the Impressionists who later became Seurat's personal associates.

It should be remembered that the course of his art had been parallel with theirs in the matter of their common debt to Delacroix and to the theorists of optics. All, moreover, were colorists, carrying

on something of the Oriental tradition that comes into European art early in the nineteenth century, and is strengthened by Delacroix's journey to Morocco and later on by the arrival of Japanese prints. It is well known that Utamaro, Hokusai and the other masters of Ukiyoye found among the early Impressionists some of their strongest defenders, and in Seurat's time they completely captivated his friend van Gogh. If Seurat himself remains a European in his vision of nature, his color and also his design show a debt to the æsthetics of the East.

By 1882 he was ready to begin with his first pictures. He had spent a year in military service after leaving the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and then resumed his studies in drawing, varied by days of sketching in the environs of Paris. The practice of making thumb-box studies in oils, which he began then, was continued till the end of his life. Some of these little color notes attain the importance of complete pictures, for the artist never began even the least of them without a basis of design, and when he worked on them with the divided touch that gave full play to his idea of color, he often gives more than a hint of the fulness of his art. At other times, the small panels serve him only for the notation of some brief effect of sunlight or rain and these sketches, usually done with the mingling brushwork of the older schools, do not permit him to express his ideas as he could in the technique that suited his analytical mind. Already in his earliest canvases he used color according to the laws of contrast,

though it still appears in unbroken masses and in the darker tones.

A chance sketch (still in existence) of boys bathing in the Seine supplied the point of departure for the first of those large canvases—six in number—which, with a few smaller pictures, constitute the work of Georges Seurat. “La Baignade” is already, as Maurice Denis has said, a masterpiece. To see the picture today is to accept the year 1884, when it was completed, as one of the landmarks in the history of modern art, for it is with this work that Seurat reaches his maturity. We have, beside the painted studies for it, various drawings of the figures. David never worked with greater severity than did the man who analyzed these masses and movements till he knew them in their least detail, and yet over some of the drawings there broods the mystery of a Rembrandt. In the finished work it is perhaps Ingres who seems to have inspired the quality of the line, but at once we are led away from thought of that master by the color which, with all the sobriety of its heavy blues and greens, tells of a richer scheme of coloration than any that Ingres could use.

However much Seurat pored over books and reproductions at the libraries, as many as are the masters of whom he reminds us, he is best thought of as a modern primitive. He has the freshness of vision, the patience and the sense of perfection of the primitives, and he is as far as they from standing apart from his predecessors. Even at the moment of the “Baignade,” when his art seems to spring into existence through a power of absolute creation as, sixty years

earlier, Delacroix's had done with the "Dante and Virgil," the artist's debt to the past is none the less certain. In Seurat's case it was, as we have seen, Delacroix himself who was the initiator of the young master in the theory of color on which this first great work, and every one to follow it, were based. And beyond doubt Corot, both through his use of the figure and his sentiment for landscape, exerts his influence—by which we can follow the classic line back to Claude and to Fouquet, an ancestor for whose largeness of conception and perfection of finish Seurat offers the closest parallel there is in modern times.

The "Baignade," refused at the Salon of 1884, was shown at the exhibition of the Indépendants which was organized that year. Signac, today the president of the Society, was also an exhibitor from the first, and it was because of the similar tendency of their work that the two young men were drawn into their acquaintance at the improvised galleries. Without passing through the official schools where Seurat had studied, Signac had begun at once with the Impressionist painting of his seniors, many of whom he knew personally. He was therefore ready to initiate his friend into the new methods of obtaining luminosity by oppositions of color. Seurat gave to the problem the full power of what Elie Faure calls his "sovereign intelligence," and in two years carried to its farthest reach the division of color into its component hues and the recombining of those hues in the eye of the spectator. In 1886 he exhibited "Un Dimanche

à la Grande Jatte" which Signac and others declare to be the first picture entirely executed in the divisionist technique, also known as *pointillisme*, the distinguishing mark of the Neo-Impressionist school.

Like the "Baignade," the big canvas of the Parisians enjoying their Sunday outing on the island of the Seine grew up from a series of those small outdoor studies which Seurat never ceased to make and from drawings for various personages and details in the picture. Some of these he had exhibited at the Indépendants in 1884, and various experiments in combining them brought him to the definitive sketch of the whole composition now owned in New York and exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum and on other occasions. It still shows a tendency to brush together the colors whose effect on one another Seurat had determined so exactly. He had already reached his use of a painted band or frame, complementing the color of the adjacent part of the picture. For this device Signac, in his search among Delacroix's writings, finds an explicit anticipation, and cites the great Romanticist as employing it himself in the decorations in the church of St. Sulpice, those glorious paintings of the end of the master's career which offer us his color theory most accessibly and most fully.

From the study for the Grande Jatte picture to the finished work the progression is along the line of definiteness. The paint is applied in detached brush-strokes, each color being so planned for in advance that it was possible for the artist to work almost as does the chemist,

adding the requisite amount of pigment to each space, whether he saw the effect in daylight or whether he painted at night. Could anything be further from the procedure of the Impressionists, with their brief periods of intense observation, their seizing of effects in nature by the accuracy of their eyesight, their reliance on instinct rather than on law! "*Monet est un oeil,—mais quel oeil!*" said Cézanne. The establishing of the laws which govern the relationship between color and light is the phase of Seurat's work that the earlier writers could follow, seeing in it, according to their viewpoint, the decline of art into scientific impersonality or the rise of the artist from fumbling to certitude. It was by such a use of system that the great decorators of Venice were able to cover their enormous surfaces with the vigor and freshness of a sketch. Maurice Denis cites a letter of Paul Veronese's in which a brother of the master is asked to send the pot of paint for blondes. Seurat's return to a schematic and intellectual style, as revolutionary as it seemed at the moment when sensation and sentiment were most in vogue, represents only a turn in a cycle of tradition to which his classical spirit made him adhere so strongly.

But in that advance toward definiteness, which we have noticed, the question of form is more important even than that of color. Mme. Cousturier gives a clear indication of the precedence of the two qualities in Seurat's work when she states that the painter developed his use of color by the same analysis that he had previously applied

to the possibilities of black and white, of line and angle, mass and accent, in his drawings. His last pictures bespeak an even deeper love of draftsmanship than what he expressed at the time when it was almost the sole basis of his art. How, in later years, he thought of all the properties of painting as co-ordinated appears in Seurat's own statement as to his procedure. This statement, approximately contained in the study of Jules Christophe which has served as the basis for most writing on the great Neo-Impressionist, is more accurately given in a letter which came to light a few years ago and which I translate entire,—as to its credo—for in another passage of the document, Seurat speaks of details in the previous publication as containing a misunderstanding of his meaning.

Heading his lines with the word "*Esthétique*," he says, "Art is harmony. Harmony is the analogy of contrary elements and the analogy of similar elements of *tone, color and line*, considered according to their dominants and under the influence of light, in gay, calm, or sad combinations.

The contraries are:

For tone, one more clear (luminous) for one more dark:

For color, the complementaries, that is to say a certain red opposed to its complementary, etc. (red-green, orange-blue, yellow-violet);

For line, those forming a right angle.

Gaiety of *tone* is given by the luminous dominant; of *color*, by the warm dominant; of *line*, by lines above the horizontal.

Calm of tone is equality between dark and light; of color, equality between warm and cold; in line, it is given by the horizontal.

Sad tone is given by the dark tone dominant; in color by the cold dominant; in line by descending directions.

Technique:

Taking for granted the phenomena of the duration of the impression of light on the retina—

Synthesis necessarily follows as a result. The means of expression is the optical mingling of the tones and of the tints (local color and that resulting from illumination by the sun, an oil-lamp, gas, etc.), that is to say, of the lights and their reactions (the shadows), following the laws of *contrast*, of gradation and of irradiation.

The frame is in the harmony opposed to that of the tones, the colors and the lines of the picture.”

The letter dates from the summer of 1890, some seven months before the artist's death, but the ideas it contains date back much earlier. From glimpses we get of him in conversation with his friends, we can see that the principles he lays down had for years been assuming clearer expression in his mind until he could state them like a scientific formula. A silent man, confiding even to his intimates but little of his personal affairs, he was always ready to discuss his theories, and on such occasions would suddenly begin to talk freely and forcefully, seizing a bit of chalk to illustrate—on the floor, if that were most convenient—the effect of one line upon

another. We may be sure, however, that it was the explanation of qualities already in his pictures that he was giving—not merely plans for the work he saw ahead of him. In the “Baignade” the general disposition of the lines and masses is already far advanced toward the complete control which he was to achieve in the next few years. The masses are less differentiated from one another, perhaps vaguer in their design than those of “Un Dimanche à la Grande Jatte,” but today no one can look at the use of the horizontal of the bridge with its echoes in the line of the canoe and the shadows on the bank, the various verticals and the oblique lines with their several inclinations, and fail to see that even in 1884 Seurat had consciously used line for its inherent properties, in the way that he describes to us in words, six years later. (*Illustrated p. 2.*)

But without the words his purpose becomes more evident with each new work. The Grande Jatte picture is finer in its articulation, its organization, than is its predecessor, as the higher animals are more wonderful in their complexity than the lower ones. It deals with design in the third dimension, as does a cathedral, and indeed as we look at the perspective of tree-stems and the arch formed by the branches and foliage, we become aware of another step in the unbroken lineage of French art: it is to the Gothic architects that we are carried back, and the great upright figures of the foreground are descendants of those which we owe to the Gothic sculptors. There

is the same warm interest in humanity, the same hieratic purity of line and plane that gives to the feeling its reserve and dignity.

The three pictures which follow ("Les Poseuses," in 1888, "La Parade" and "Le Chahut," in 1889), are more especially developments of the abstract quality in Seurat's picture-making. In his last and, I believe, greatest masterpiece, "Le Cirque," the interest in the people he creates is the thing that leaps ahead, even while his construction advances in firmness and subtlety once more. "Les Poseuses," a small and complete study for which was shown at the International Exhibition of 1913—the larger work being in a German collection, shows Seurat working in a high key, perhaps to clear away whatever reminiscences of the dark pictures of his early period still appeared in the canvas of the Grande Jatte. His outdoor painting of the time is of the same nature, his preference being for a flat, white light which favored minute observation of differences of tint and line rather than contrast of illumined passages with those in shadow. And so the "Poseuses" is a kind of polyphony in which one high, clear voice sings with another, as in a Fra Angelico or a Baldovinetti.

More severe in its straight-lined schematism, even more determined to reach a geometrical structure that should stand of itself, regardless of the enveloping chiaroscuro of Seurat's early work, is "La Parade," the side-show given outside the showman's booth at French fairs. In this work and in "Le Chahut" we see the painter most clearly as the man who could isolate a color or a line and decide

upon its function in a design, as his letter states. Here also is the fullest anticipation of the state of mind which was to find general expression twenty or twenty-five years later, when the artists were no longer content to use the abstract properties of form and color in pictures still presenting a visual image—when all representation was suppressed so that the idea could be embodied in a design from which all confusion with the thing seen was eliminated. As much as we owe to the great instinct, the classical structure and the profound logic of Cézanne, it is but natural that the genius of the next generation should propose our contemporary problem in terms more nearly those of our time.

And in his final work, Seurat prophesies once more the direction that was to be taken. The great rhythms of “Le Chahut,” followed in lines as pure as those of Assyrian bas-reliefs or of Greek draperies, have become more mysterious; they disperse throughout the whole picture just as the big masses of “La Baignade” become the finer organism of “Un Dimanche à la Grande Jatte.” “Le Cirque” shows Seurat more fully in control of his means than ever before; he has resumed his consideration of darkened space and of distance, his color reaches its ultimate sureness, his design its limit of minuteness—as it balances flying curves with harsh rectangles—and of freedom as he invents a combination of forms such as no work of the past had hinted at. And with this mastery comes his greatest interest in the subject of his picture. We thrill to the fairy grace of the

equestrian figure that concentrates the loveliness of all the women whose silhouette Seurat had fixed with his *conté* crayon; the magical horse, the elegant ring-master and the clowns evoke all of our immemorial delight in public spectacles and—perhaps the most significant detail—each one of the numerous little people in the background is described with an affectionate humor and an exactitude that have no parallel in modern times—to find their equal, one must go back through the centuries to Pieter Breughel, whose grandeur and clarity led me to speak of him in connection with Seurat when the latter's "Poudreuse" was first exhibited here some two years ago. Perhaps after all the arts of the past that the great modern has recalled, Breughel's is the nearest to his own, both for its æsthetic and for its human quality.

But it is for its faculty for looking toward the future that we must, in conclusion, speak of this work. Today, when a period of abstraction and analysis is merging into one where the visible world is affirming its fascination for the artist once more, we can see with a clearness impossible to his contemporaries, the significance of the last picture of Seurat. As compared with "La Parade" or even with "Le Chahut," it tells us that his increasing control over the æsthetic elements, his always more perfect conversion into form and color of the amorphous material furnished by the eyes did no more than balance his deepening idea of life. In the early part of 1891, when, for Seurat, could be spoken the words that Mrs. Browning took for

G E O R G E S S E U R A T

the title of her poem, "He giveth his beloved sleep," it was not as the "tired child at a show who sees through tears the jugglers leap" that the artist stopped work on his picture of the circus; it was through clear and eager eyes that he looked at the spectacle, knowing, as he must have known, that his art was a complete one and that the work it forecast, the work that others were to execute, would be built on firm ground.

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GEORGES SEURAT

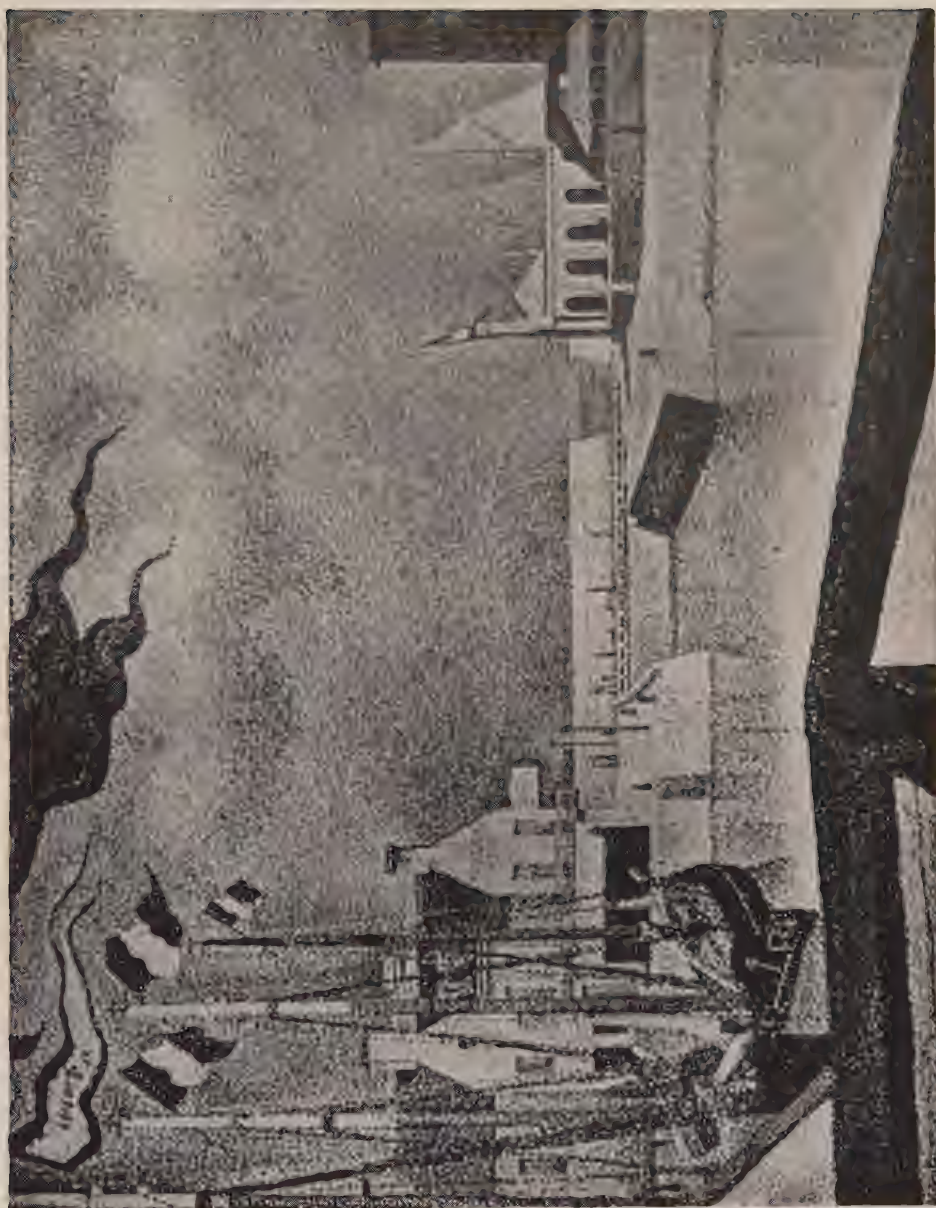


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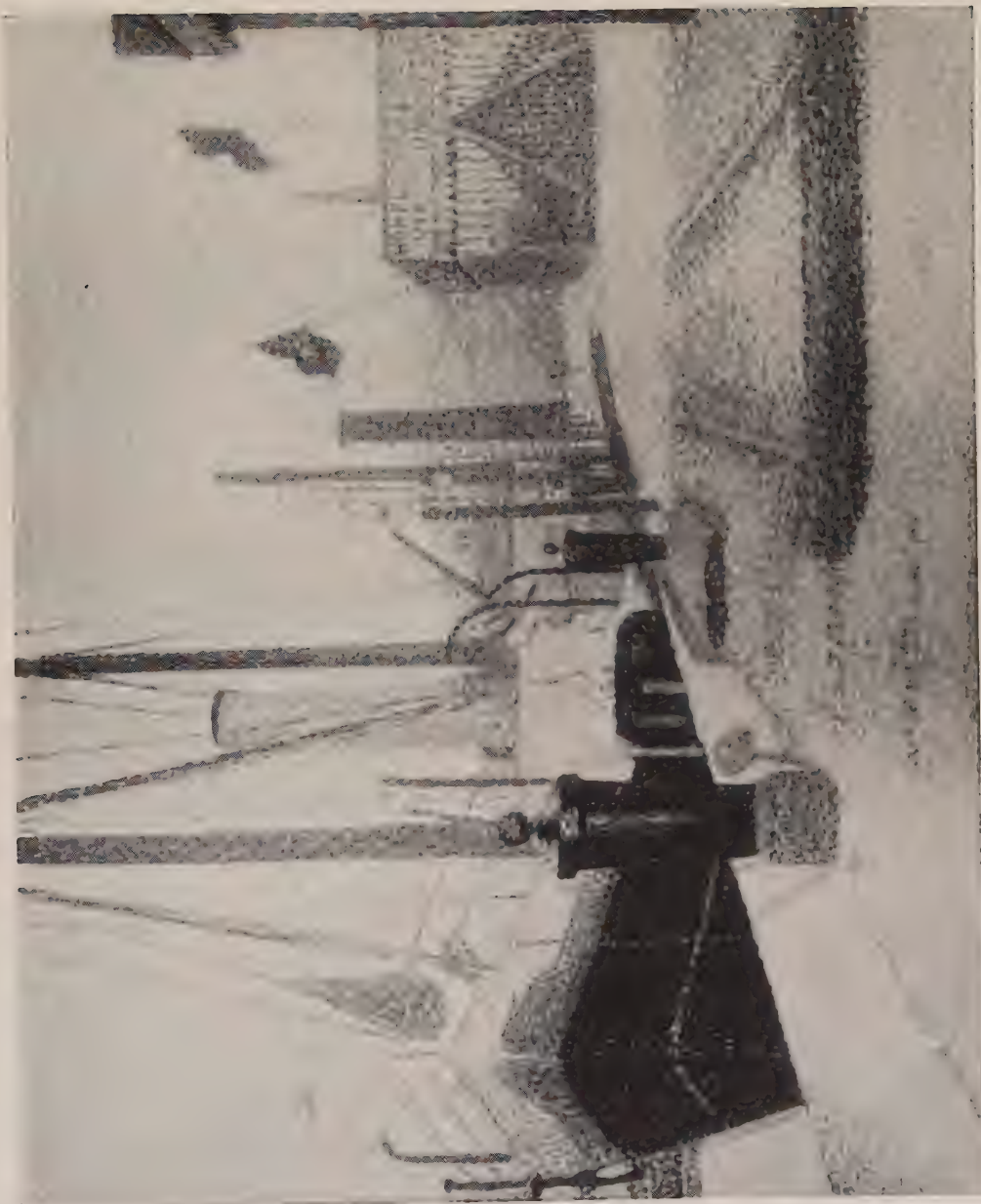
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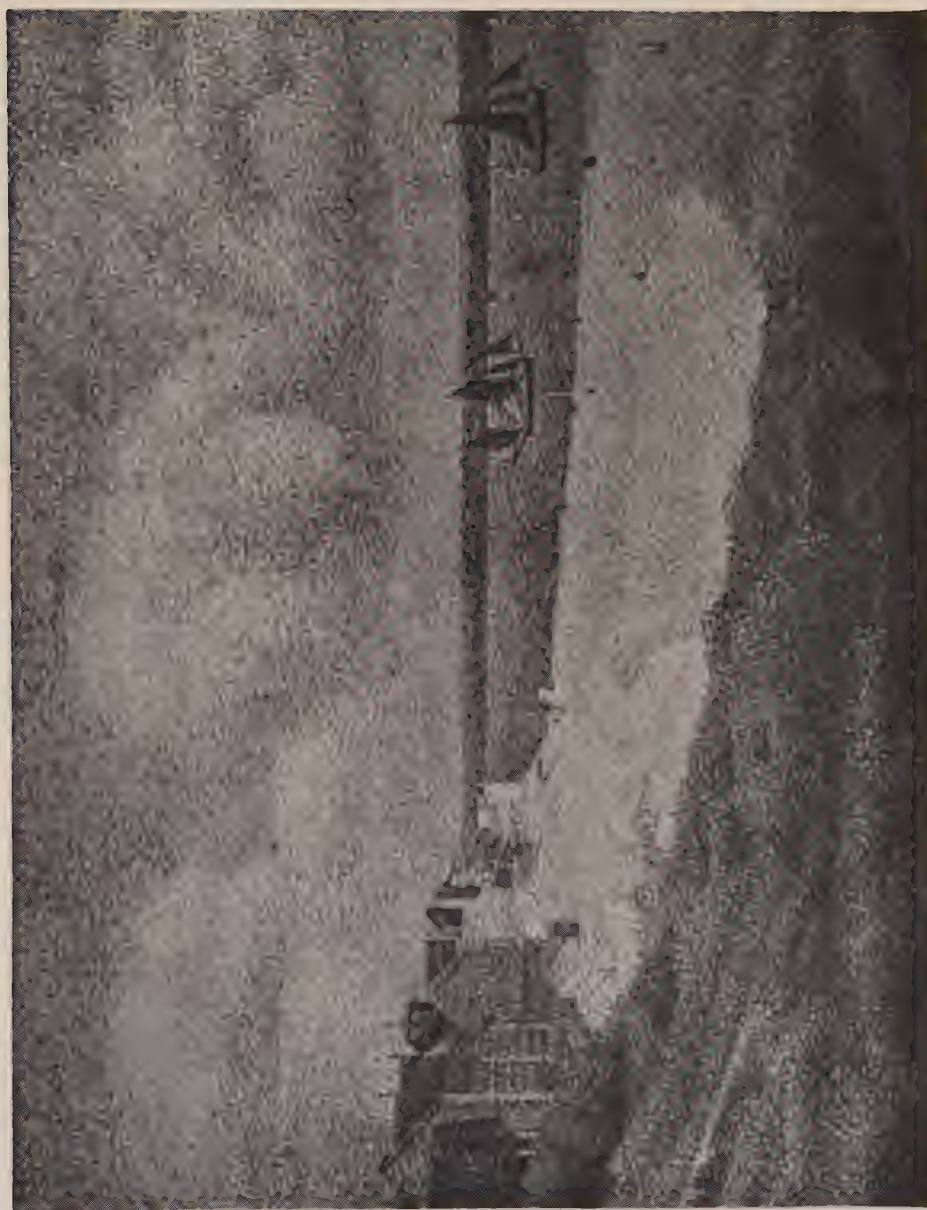
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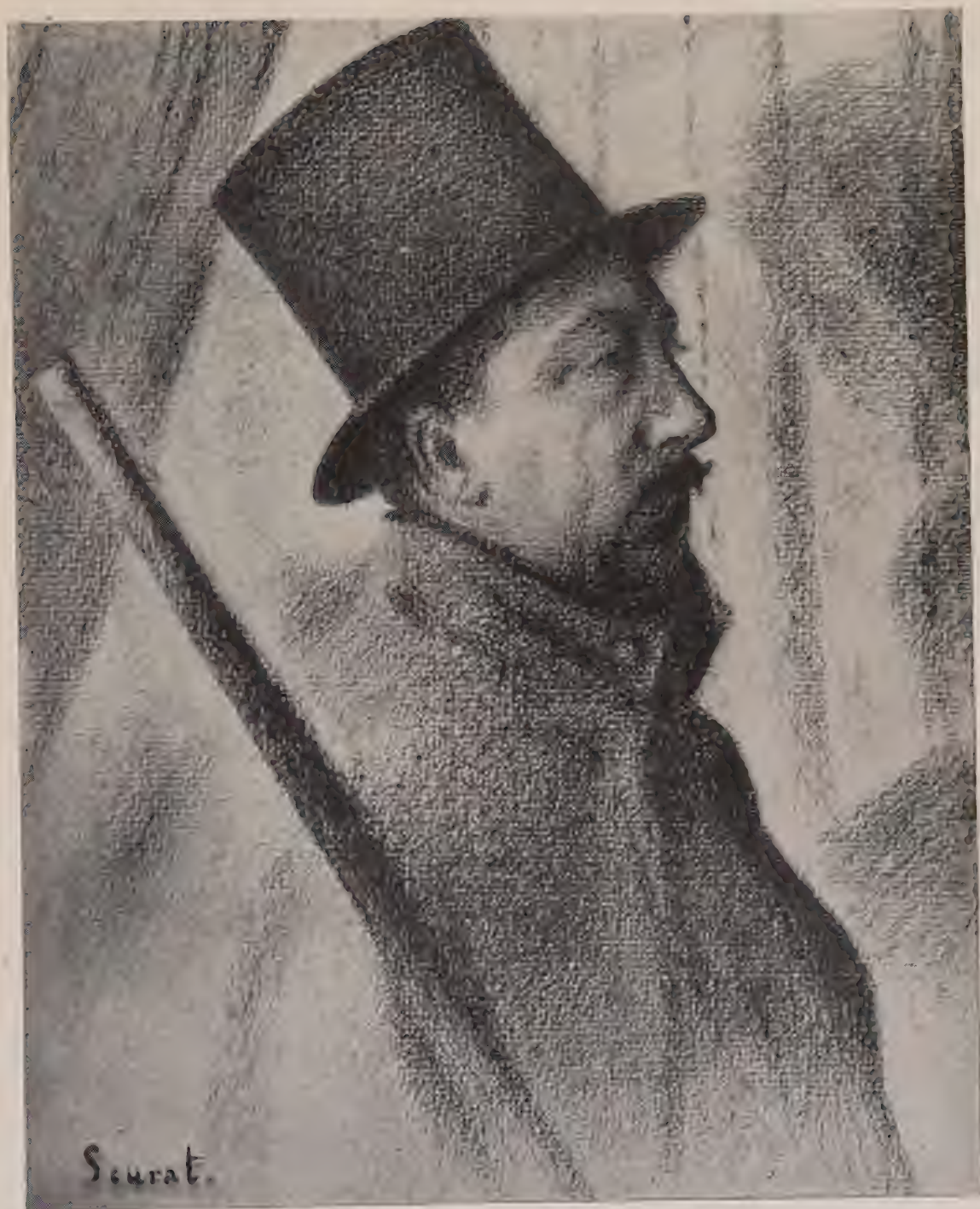


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